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Riveting theater in Geneva; the pope's rabbi on Jewish/Catholic relations

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 17, 2014 All Things Catholic

Geneva was the setting for a riveting bit of theater Thursday as two Vatican heavyweights sat before a panel of independent experts who compose the United Nations' Committee on the Rights of the Child to field tough questions about the sexual abuse scandals that have rocked the Catholic church for more than a decade.

The U.N.'s Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989, and the committee has held regular hearings since 1991 to monitor implementation in the 193 counties that have ratified it. In that sense, there was nothing exceptional about Thursday's session, since the Holy See is just one more signatory nation. Yet the fact that this was the first time senior Vatican personnel have appeared in full public view (the session was webcast around the world) to talk about the abuse scandals in a venue where they couldn't set the tone or control the conversation made it undeniably fascinating.

Heading into the event, anyone familiar with the Vatican's history of occasionally tone-deaf commentary on the abuse crisis had to be holding their breath. If nothing else, Thursday seemed to demonstrate that they've learned something.

Rome dispatched two figures well suited to engage criticism: Italian Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, a career diplomat who represents the Vatican to the U.N. in Geneva, and Maltese Auxiliary Bishop Charles Scicluna, the Vatican's former top prosecutor on abuse cases who is widely seen as a leading voice for reform. (It was Scicluna who provided the day's sound bite by insisting that the Vatican now "gets it.")

Both proved unflappable in the face of fairly aggressive inquiries, some of which were about specific scandals -- such as the notorious "Magdalene laundries" cases in Ireland and recent revelations in Spain that as many as 300,000 children may have been surreptitiously removed from their families and sold into adoption via church-run centers -- and broad matters of policy, such as the willingness of church officials to cooperate with criminal probes and the sort of anti-abuse training offered both to church personnel and to children in Catholic venues.

Scicluna insisted repeatedly that the church now recognizes a "non-negotiable principle" of paramount concern for the well-being of children, invoking it among other things to assert that church officials must cooperate fully with abuse investigations by civil law enforcement.

"No interest should obstruct the functioning of domestic law in the country" where an act of abuse has occurred, Scicluna said, "whoever or whatever institution is involved."

(As an old Rome hand, Scicluna is well aware that many Catholic prelates have used the term "non-negotiable" to characterize the church's stands on life issues such as abortion and gay marriage, so his application of it to the fight against child abuse meant he was not just speaking to the U.N. panel, but in a way was speaking to his fellow bishops, too.)

Tomasi likewise defined the abuse scandals as "a wound that hurts the community of faith" and said the church

today feels not just a "legal" but a "human, moral and spiritual commitment to defend the principles of the convention that protect children."

In his prepared remarks, Tomasi said the church wants to be "an example of best practice" in child protection.

The U.N. panel has no power to compel nations to do anything, but it's expected to issue a set of recommendations to the Vatican based on the hearing. Judging by the tone of Thursday's exchanges, they're likely to feature admiration for the strong commitment to reform voiced by Tomasi and Scicluna, tinged with skepticism about how consistently that commitment is applied to specific cases.

Though critics of the church's record issued statements calling the Vatican presentation disappointing, the experts seemed eager to believe something has changed.

Sara de Jesus Oviedo Fierro of Spain said the committee now has "great expectations that new steps will be taken, that dialogue with civil society will happen, [that] this will become a reality. This will attest to this new era, this new dawn for the Holy See."

Here are three other takeaways from the Thursday U.N. hearing.

First, Tomasi confirmed that Polish Archbishop Jozef Wesolowski, the former papal ambassador to the Dominican Republic removed in August and facing allegations of child sexual abuse, will be prosecuted by the Vatican's criminal tribunal "with the severity the case deserves." (Actually, Tomasi used the word "judged," which is getting ahead of things a bit since a preliminary investigation is still underway and technically, Wesolowski hasn't yet been charged with a crime.)

From the Vatican's point of view, Wesolowski is a citizen of the Holy See and a former papal agent, so he's subject not only to the ecclesiastical penalties that apply to all clergy under canon law but also the criminal code of the Vatican as a sovereign state.

Assuming a trial goes ahead, it will almost certainly be the most-watched session of the Vatican tribunal since the October 2012 prosecution of Paolo Gabriele, the erstwhile papal butler charged with being the mole at the heart of the Vatican leaks affair. Since the Vatican repeatedly has pledged a new culture of transparency with regard to the abuse scandals, it will likely face considerable pressure to make any proceeding in the Wesolowski case as public as possible.

The last thing the Vatican probably needs is the perception that it's conducting its own trial in order to sweep the truth under the rug.

Second, most of the immediate blowback against Thursday's presentation by Tomasi and Scicluna focused on the claim that Rome is not responsible for supervising the more than 400,000 Catholic priests of the world, which falls instead to local bishops and religious superiors. Repeatedly, Tomasi and Scicluna offered statements of principle as to how the church ought to operate, but were then forced to concede that implementation varies widely at the grassroots.

Critics found the claim that the Vatican can't take direct control of the situation disingenuous.

"We're very saddened that such a huge and powerful church bureaucracy continues to pretend it's powerless over its own officials," said a statement from the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

In fairness, insistence on the autonomy of the local church is perfectly consistent with both official Catholic ecclesiology and actual practice in the church. It's worth noting that a federal judge in Oregon, who's a Mormon

with no dog in Catholic fights, took a close look at the contention that priests are "employees" of the Vatican in a lawsuit related to the abuse scandals in 2012 and ruled that they clearly aren't.

Nevertheless, the skepticism those claims elicited Thursday illustrates the uphill climb the Vatican faces in trying to persuade people that it couldn't impose its will if it really wanted to.

In truth, this has long been one the paradoxes generated by the sex abuse mess. For decades, church reformers (especially on the liberal end of things) have clamored for greater collegiality in Catholicism, and they applauded vigorously when Pope Francis pledged support for a "healthy decentralization" in his recent document, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Yet when it comes to sex abuse, they seem to want the exact opposite -- they want the long arm of the law to reach down from Rome and crack heads.

What this perhaps suggests is that theologians working on the nature and limits of papal authority and the relationship between local churches and Rome need to sit down with the child protection people to make sure that the real-world experience of the abuse scandals is brought into the conversation.

The truth of it may be that a strong pope is a bit like a lawyer -- everybody loves to complain until they need one.

Third, the sex abuse crisis is where two powerful narratives about Catholicism collide. One is that the church is a secretive institution devoted above all to protecting its own interests, so that claims of turning over a new leaf are viewed through a lens of suspicion; the other is that Francis is a reforming pope genuinely committed to the poor and the vulnerable, and people seem hungry to believe that he'll do the right thing.

The tenor of the questions I fielded on CNN about the hearing in Geneva clearly reflected this collision, since most of these segments ended with the host asking when Francis was going to clean things up.

In terms of what would count for most people as proof that Francis is committed to doing that, one step would be to publicly discipline a bishop who's failed to make a "zero-tolerance" policy stick.

When the pope removed the so-called "bling bishop" in Germany for spending $42 million remodeling his residence, it sent a clear signal that Francis is in earnest about his vision of a poor church for the poor. A similar move with a bishop who failed to abide by the church's new anti-abuse guidelines could have a similar impact on perceptions.

On background, Vatican officials say figuring out how to process these "negligent supervision" cases is high on their to-do list and is potentially something the new papal commission on the protection of minors announced by Cardinal Sean O'Malley in December could examine.

If anything might help the second narrative sketched above, "Francis the reformer," prevail over the first, which amounts to "same-old, same-old from the church," the sight of the pope calling a negligent bishop to account may well be it.

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Also on Thursday, an old friend of Pope Francis came calling on him in Rome. Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires led a delegation of Jewish leaders from Argentina into an audience with the pope, with whom he co-authored the 2010 book *On Heaven and Earth* while Francis was still Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

Skorka said while the delegation had some serious business to discuss, they also spent time joking and chatting with their old Argentine friend, even festively singing a few verses from the psalms together. In a gesture of

hospitality, the pope treated the group to a lunch at his residence in the Casa Santa Marta catered by Ba' Ghetto, a famous kosher restaurant in Rome.

(For the record, the restaurant's owner said Francis was especially impressed with the pistachio mousse.)

Skorka delivered a public lecture on Jewish/Catholic relations Thursday night at Rome's Jesuit-run Gregorian University, accompanied by Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, who heads the Vatican office that deals with ecumenism and relations with Jews. Skorka and Koch also took part in a brief press conference afterward.

Here are three quick impressions from the event.

First, during the Benedict years, it seemed that the drift in official Catholic policy on relations with other religions was away from specifically theological conversation toward what Benedict XVI called "intercultural" dialogue, meaning a focus on shared values on social, moral and even political matters.

The idea was that theology tends to be where followers of different religions are destined to disagree, while a focus on cultural and moral questions puts the accent on what they have in common.

Both Skorka and Koch said Thursday night, however, that they believe the future of Catholic/Jewish relations lies precisely in the theological arena. Skorka said he talked with Francis at the end of September, and that "what the pope wanted to convey to me is the importance of new theological steps."

"We need a theological explanation of what a Jew is to a Catholic, and what a Catholic is to a Jew," Skorka said.

Koch made much the same point at the press conference.

"The next step has to be a deepening of our theology," Koch said. "We need a Christian theology of Judaism and a Jewish theology of Christianity."

"I'm convinced Pope Francis wants to go in that direction," Koch said.

At least vis-à-vis Judaism, therefore, it would seem that rumors of the death of theology as the heart of interreligious dialogue have been greatly exaggerated.

Second, the focus of Skorka's lecture was the Latin American experience of Jewish/Catholic relations. (Argentina is somewhat unique in Latin America in that it has a sizeable Jewish community, estimated today at roughly 250,000.)

In the course of his talk, Skorka made a fascinating observation without really developing it, which was that while Jewish/Catholic exchanges in the West often pivot on the past -- the history of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and so on -- the focus in Latin America is more on the present.

Skorka noted that a 2004 meeting of the International Jewish Catholic Liaison Committee, one of the primary vehicles for dialogue at the global level, was held in Buenos Aires. Afterward, he said, German Cardinal Walter Kasper, who held Koch's job at the time, said it had been "the first meeting not to focus on past issues but rather how to join forces to face the dramatic needs of the present and future."

In part, Skorka suggested, this focus reflected the climate in Argentina created by the economic crisis that erupted in the late 1990s, which caused widespread unemployment, riots and the collapse of the government, leaving half the country's population and 70 percent of its children in poverty.

"The crisis created a situation in which religious institutions were called upon to work together in a very deep

way," Skorka said. "There was lots of coordinated work to help people in dire need."

"Something interesting happened" in the middle of the economic meltdown, he said.

"Society started to ask who can we really trust, and religious institutions came to the fore," Skorka said, adding that the situation induced religious leaders to develop "a tremendously pragmatic" form of dialogue.

For those who wonder if Jewish/Catholic relations can ever really escape the ghosts of history, in other words, perhaps voices from the developing world may have something to contribute.

Third, Skorka was asked about Pope Francis' upcoming trip to the Holy Land in May, and his reaction seemed to offer another confirmation of just how high the stakes will be.

"It's very sensitive," he said. "There are lots of passions and feelings on all sides ... the expectations are very high, and somehow the pope will have to respond to them."

Given the competing visions in the region among "Jews, Palestinians and Christians," Skorka said, Francis "needs to be very balanced" in his approach.

Skorka said his primary concern for the trip is that it doesn't end up as a "banality," by which he seemed to mean an exercise in saying the right things that don't really have any impact on the ground.

"It will be hard, but what I hope is for him to leave a message of peace," Skorka said. "Especially in his meetings with leaders, I hope he can have an impact."

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